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## City of Dreams? Belfast, planning and the 'myth' of development

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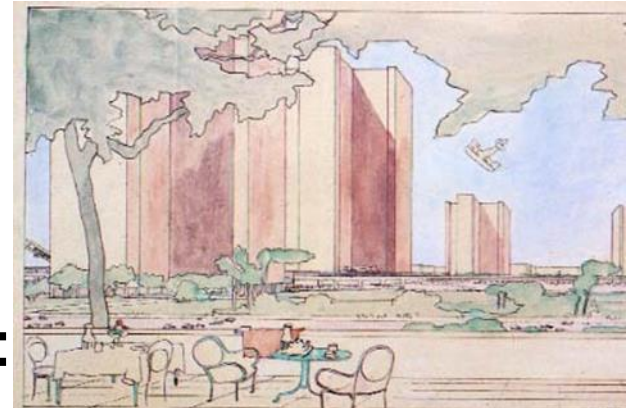
# *City of Dreams?* **Belfast, planning and the 'myth' of development**

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Queen's University, Belfast.

# Outline

- The meaning of 'Belfast Futures'
- 'Development' and its myths
- Two visions of Belfast Futures:
  - 1945 – Planning Proposal for the Belfast Area
  - 2015 – Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan
- The language of plans, the control of the future



# Belfast Futures?

- Where do we find the future of Belfast?
- City Plans and their purpose
- Changing concepts of:
  - 'Future'
  - 'Belfast'
  - 'Planning'
- ... all share a belief in 'development'



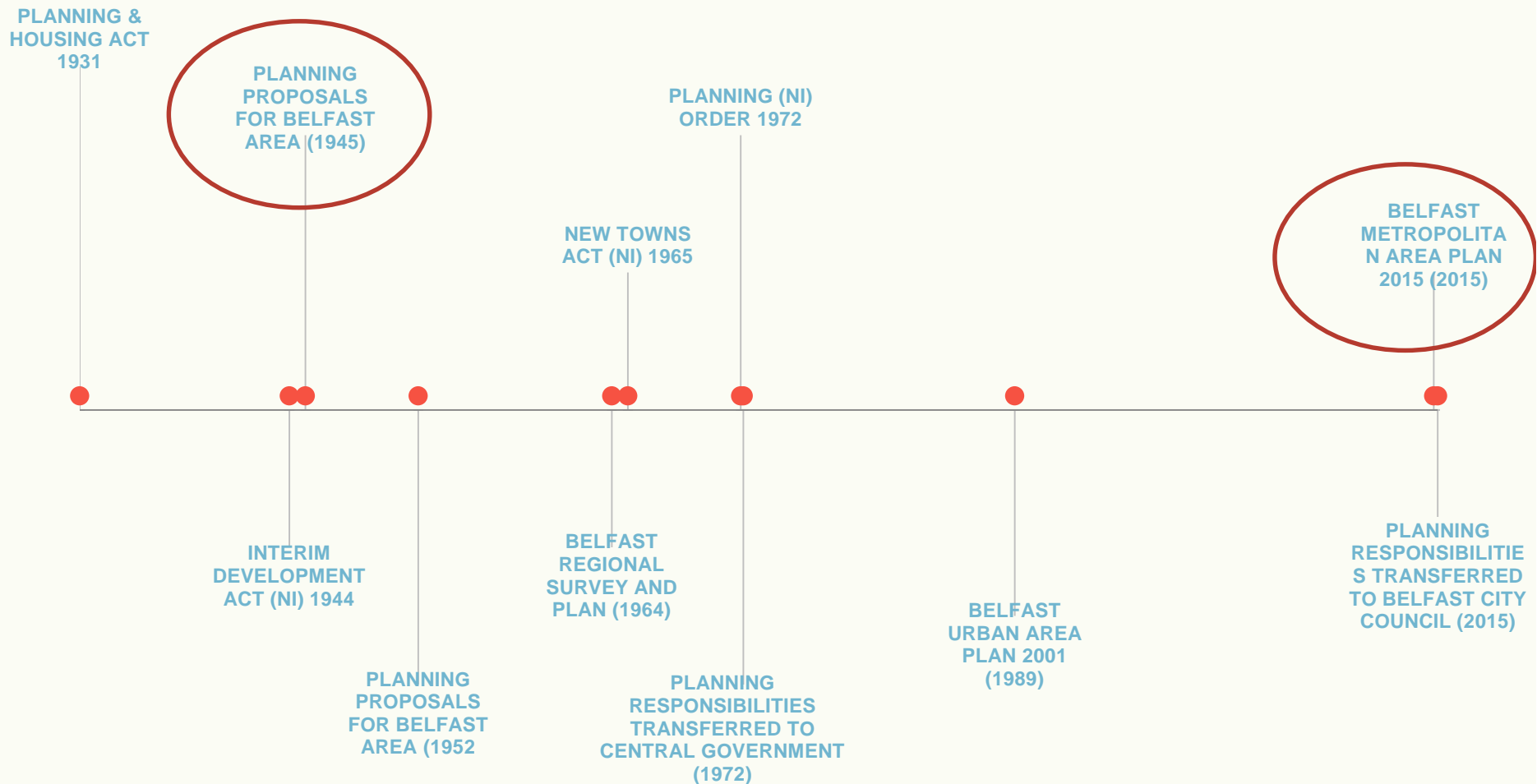
# Development and its myths

**Development:** the establishment of conditions and institutions that foster the realisation of the potential of the capacities and faculties of the human mind in people, communities and, in turn, in places (Sen 1999)

- Planning is ultimately about securing 'development'
- It is an 'unexamined term' and language in planning is often unquestioned
- It begs the questions of:
  - What *sort* of development do we want?
  - *How* will this happen?
  - *Who* is the development for?
  - Where does develop occur and at what scale?
  - What are the *alternatives*?

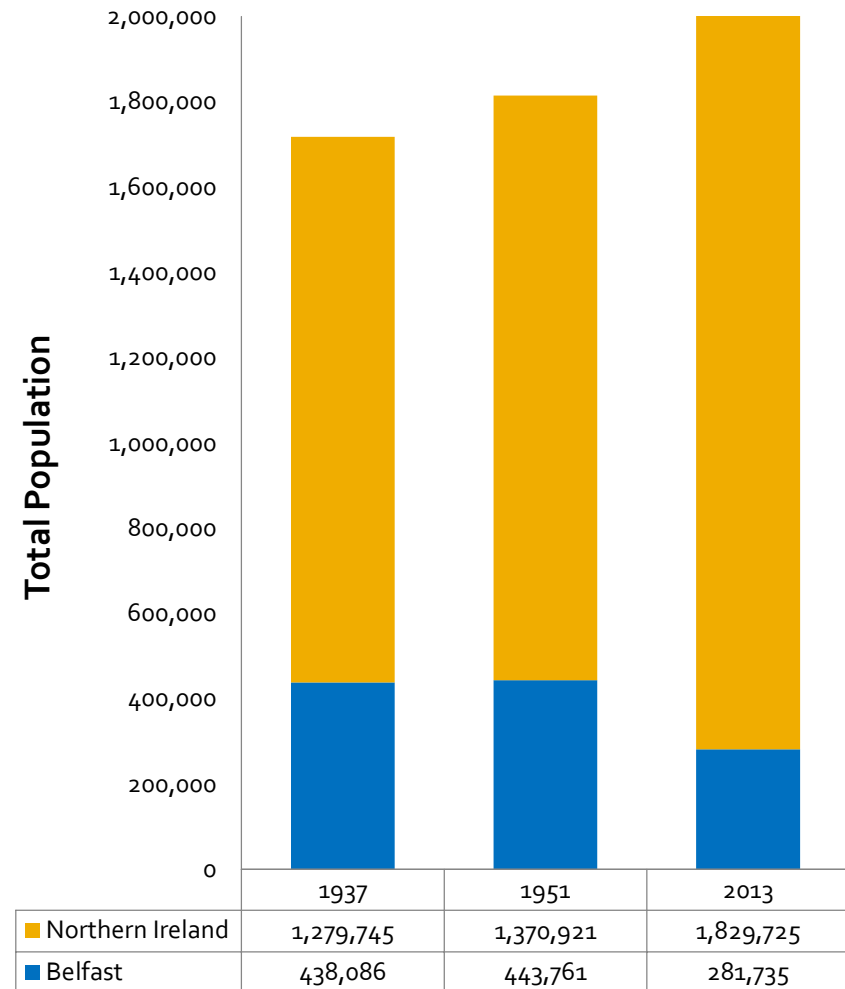


# *Back to the Future:* A Belfast planning timeline



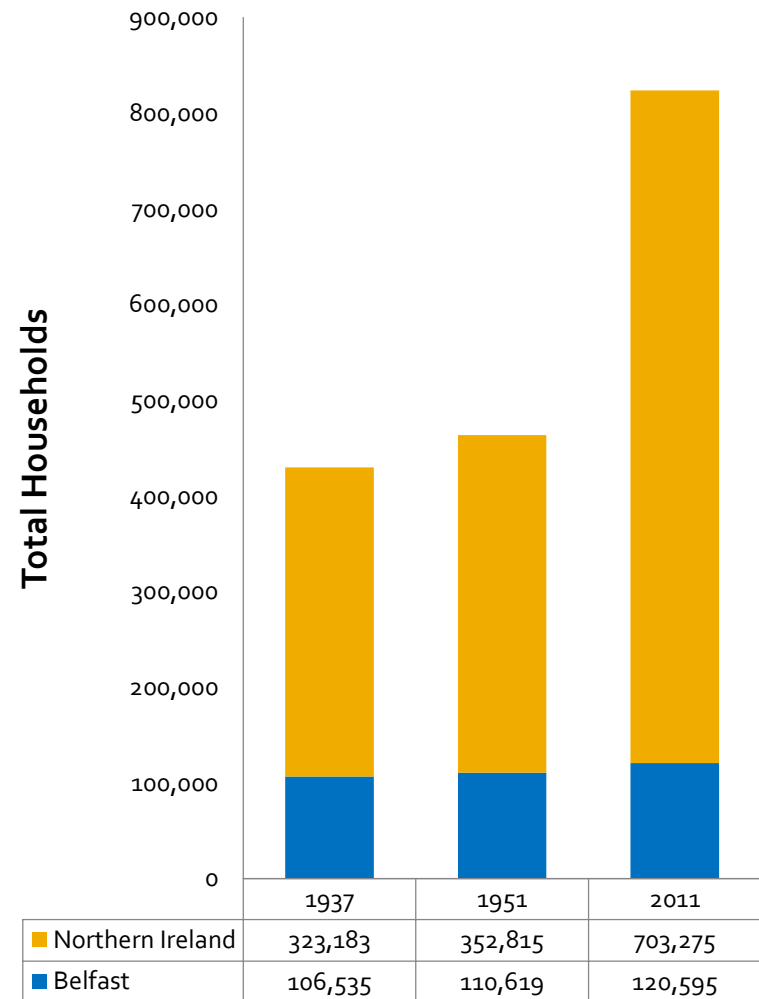
# Demographic Change

- Belfast and Northern Ireland 1937-2013
  - No census during the war
  - 1937 and 1951 Census
  - 2013 based on mid year estimates
- Demographic change
  - In 1951, Belfast accounted for 32% of the total population
  - In 2013, this has dropped to 15%
  - From 1951 – 2013 the Northern Ireland population has **increased** by over 33%
  - Over the same period, Belfast's population has **decreased** by 37%
- The 'shrinking' of urban Belfast
  - De-industrialisation
  - Urban disinvestment
  - Ethnosectarian conflict
  - Rising suburbanisation



# Sub-urban expansion and property-led planning

- Household change
  - From 1951-2011 the number of households across Northern Ireland has increased by almost 99%
  - In 1951, 31% of Northern Ireland's households were in Belfast
  - In 2011 this dropped to 17%
- From 1951 to 2011 the number of households in Belfast **increased** by 9%
  - Much of this increase occurred between 2001-2011
  - Here number of households in Belfast increased from 113,934 to 120,595 (nearly 6%)
  - Major apartment development and over-speculation throughout the urban core dominated this period
  - High vacancy levels in the urban core
  - Economic crises and recession





# Two visions of the future

1945:



- Produced by expert commission in three years.
- No public consultation
- 15 pages, 8090 words

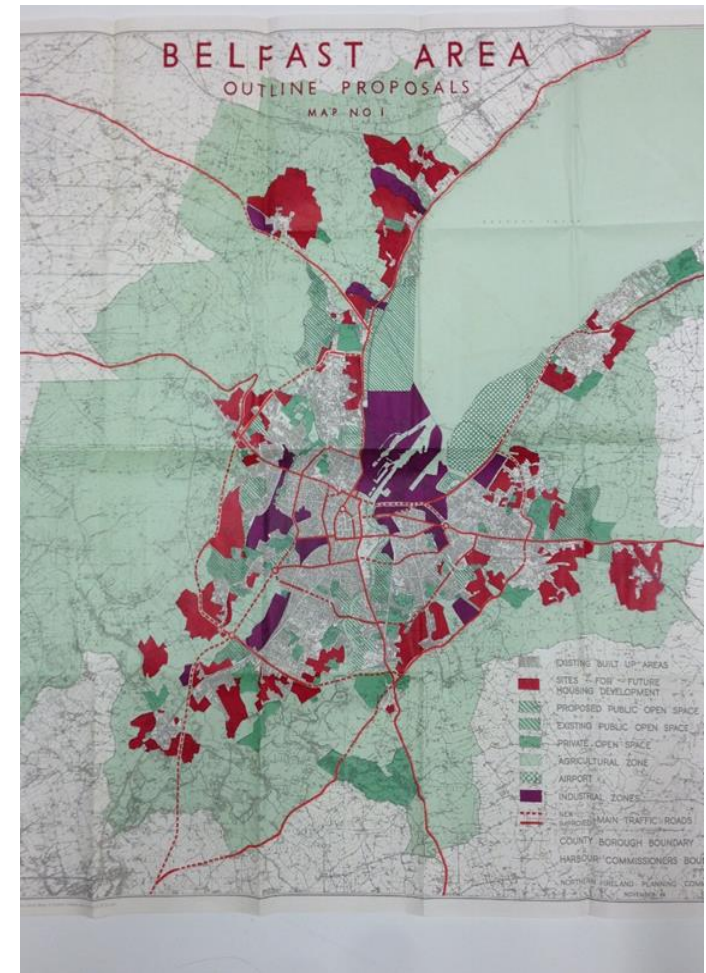
2015:



- 'Democratically' produced, subject to public consultation and public inquiry – 15 years
- Currently subject to Judicial review by DETI
- 7 Vols, 869 pages c. 532, 700 words

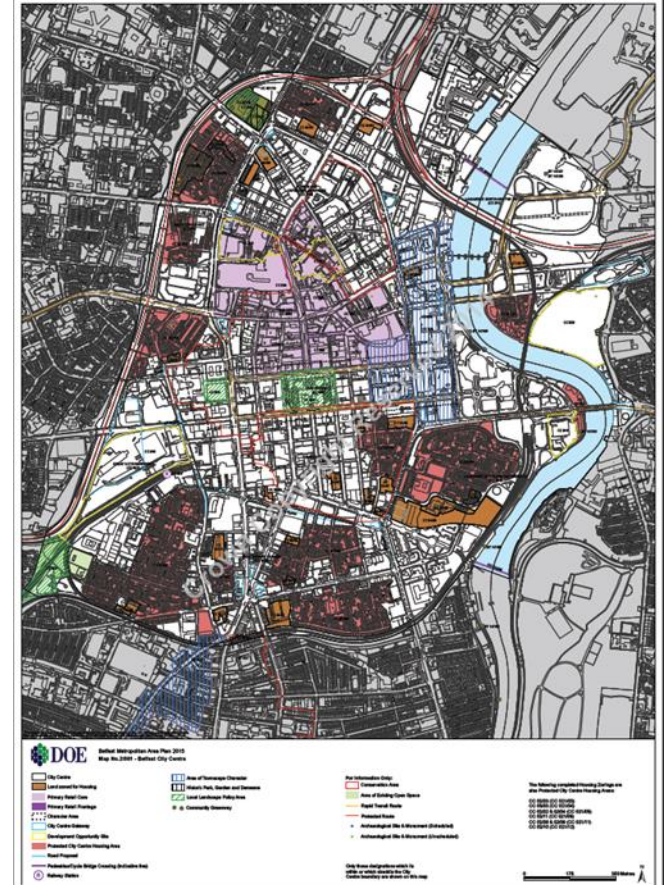
# The 1945 Plan

- A plan for reconstruction;
- Focussed on agriculture, industry and 'the health and convenience of the people'
- Key issues were suburban growth; transport; industry; 'healthy and convenient residential areas'; and Open Space.
- Proposals made in the 'best interests' of various sectors
- Proposals resisted by 'local opposition'



# BMAP 2015

- A plan to comply with planning legislation;
- An long process of consultation and enquiry
- A comprehensive plan for planning control;
- Detailed proposals for specific land use parcels;
- Facilitates 'sustainable growth'
- Proposals resisted by local and political opposition





# The rhetoric of the 'Future'



# 1945:

## Social consumption

Residential, estates, housing, people, health, living

## Connectivity/economic production

Traffic, railway, roads, travel, roads, transport,  
industries

# Planning vision

Future, new, maps, people, possible, improvement,  
advantage, action

# 2015

## Scale of planning response

Regional, local, communities, metropolitan, villages,  
centre, urban, rural, settlement, site

## Economic development

Growth, development, retail, tourism, office,  
regeneration



# Excerpts

**1945:**

*"... planning should be carried out in the best interests of Agriculture and Industry as well as of the health and convenience of the people"*

*'... bombing of Belfast has provided many opportunities'*

*'Sound planning will bring rich benefits in health and convenience in the future'*

*'... real improvement are to be made in the living conditions of the people'*

**2015:**

*'The purpose of the Plan is to inform ... of the policy framework and land use proposals that will be used to guide development decisions'*

*'One of the main functions ... is to facilitate development and create a land use framework that will allow investment to take place.'*

*'The public consultation process has been a fundamental element of the formulation of the Plan'*

# Rhetorical insights

1945

- **Ethos:** 'in the best interests.. of agriculture, industry and the health of the people'.
- **Logos:** Rationality, order, efficiency, reconstruction
- **Synecdoche:** 'convenience'
- **Metaphor:** 'unspoiled countryside'

2015

- **Ethos:** 'most extensive consultation exercise ever undertaken'.
- **Logos:** Facilitating development
- **Synecdoche:** 'sustainable growth'
- **Metaphor:** 'living and working countryside'



# Changing language of plans (1)

(After Marcuse 2015)

- A loss of directness, and **honesty** in the language of plans, and of the intentions for the future.
- **Growth** for who, for what purpose?
- **Homogenisation of entities**: '*the Metropolitan Area*'
- **Euphemisation** of value laden terms: '*balanced growth*'
- **Anonymisation** of actors: '*The zoning of land provides a basis for rational and consistent decisions on planning applications*'

# Changing language of plans (2)

- Creating **mythic entities**: *'compete successfully at the European and International level'*
- The **denial of conflict**: *provision of housing and employment in order to enhance the quality of life'*
- Co-opting/narrowing the **meaning of words**: *'sustainable growth'*
- **Misplaced concreteness**: *'... integrate the need for both conservation and development through a mix of co-ordinated economic, social and environmental policies and proposals'*



# Reflections on planning, reflections on Belfast

- A shift in the 'subject' of plans: From people to property, from development to growth.
- A shift in the meaning of words...
- A shift in the meaning of the future
- Language of the future is not about the *repression* of alternatives, but the *suppression* of their germination (Marcuse 2015).
- A democratised planning system, but a dominant discourse that has no space for debate.